

No More Tears on the Historic "Bridge of Sighs"

After Echoing for Centuries to the Tread of the Condemned and the Groans of the Tortured It Will Turn to a Way of Hope and Artistic Gayeties



Old Wood-Cut, Showing a Prisoner Being Tortured in the Ancient Dungeon Which Will Now Be Open to Visitors.



Photograph of the Bridge of Sighs Which Connects the Doge's Palace and the State Prison and Passes Over the Rio Canal.

One of the Greatest Tragedies in Venetian History—Young Foscari Brought Before His Father, the Doge, After Being Tortured and Carried Over the Bridge of Sighs to the Judgment Hall.



A Recent Prisoner, the Countess Tarnowska, Passing Down the Steps of the Ancient Prison.

THE world-famous "Bridge of Sighs" at Venice, which has been called the saddest spot in the whole world, will henceforth be only a place of happy associations, frequented by art students, tourists and curiosity seekers.

For the first time in the four hundred years of its existence the Bridge of Sighs will not be associated in any way with the trial and condemnation of unhappy prisoners.

The celebrated bridge connects the Doge's Palace, the most important civil building in the city, with the ancient State Prison, where the most conspicuous victims in the romantic and bloodstained history of Venice have been confined, tortured and executed.

Although the Doge's Palace has long been used mainly as an art museum, the Prison has, up to the present, served its ancient purpose, and many of the most notorious prisoners of recent years have been confined there. Only a few years ago the beautiful Countess Tarnowska, accused of using her strange psychic powers to drive an infatuated admirer to murder, was detained in this prison.

The mysterious veiled woman, closely guarded by attendants in long cloaks, was conveyed in a gondola from the old prison to the courthouse and back again. As the spectators watched this picturesque procession passing over the canals of Venice they were strongly reminded of the tragedies and romances of olden times that have made the story of Venice so thrilling and fascinating.

But in future no scenes of this kind will be associated with this ancient group of buildings. The State Prison is to be converted into an art centre, where students of painting, sculpture and other arts will study. Owing to its proximity to the Doge's Palace, the Basilica of St. Mark's and other famous buildings, which are filled with art treasures, it is a particularly suitable centre for students. Moreover, it is not considered in harmony with modern ideas that miserable prisoners and criminals should create a discordant note amid these beautiful surroundings.

As long as the Prison was occupied by criminals and accused persons it was impossible for students and visitors to pass freely about the Bridge of Sighs, as one end was closed to them. In ancient times prisoners were tried in the Judgment Hall

of the Doge's Palace and then conveyed for execution, torture or imprisonment to the neighboring prison.

So many prisoners have passed over the bridge that it has naturally grown to be regarded as deeply touched with sad memories, and even haunted with the spirits of the departed. Unhappy men and women have stopped here countless times during the centuries and looked out of the windows of the covered bridge and sighed as they took their last look at the sunlight. Some were on their way to death and others to torture and lifelong imprisonment in the gloomy dungeons beneath the prison.

Byron has expressed the feelings that have impressed visitors to this thrilling spot in his lines which begin:

"I stood in Venice on the Bridge of Sighs
A prison and a palace on each hand."

The bridge passes over the Rio Canal. It is beautiful in design, but the canal is narrow, the buildings high and the water dark. Little sunlight comes here during most of the day, and the appearance of the bridge is in harmony with its gloomy story. So suitable is the bridge considered for its purpose that it has been copied in prison architecture in various parts of the world, and New York's City Prison (the Tombs)

is connected with the neighboring criminal court by a similar structure.

The history of Venice is more deeply crowded with tragedies and romances than that of any other mediaeval State. There are good reasons for this. The Republic of Venice became, early in the middle ages, the wealthiest and most luxurious community in Europe.

It struggled for riches by every means in its power without a shadow of scrupulousness. It intrigued for wealth and influence in every corner of the globe. Its envoys subsidized the monarchs of distant lands when they aided Venetian designs and murdered or ruined them when they opposed those designs.

Any Venetian who hindered in any way the prosperity or power of his city was considered to have merited the most dreadful death. Men who had merely counterfeited the money of the republic were tortured to death in a terrible manner because they had attacked the commercial stability of the community. Even those who had simply entered into trade arrangements with other States were put to death in a spectacular manner.

When Venice was at the height of her power and wealth she fell under the control of a very powerful oligarchy of rich families. This oligarchy was represented by the notorious Council of Ten, which

heard accusations against anybody and passed judgment in secret, inflicting any form of death or imprisonment it pleased. The swiftness and cruelty of its judgments became notorious throughout the world.

The ruling oligarchy was determined that no individual, however able or powerful, should become stronger than the dominant class, and the mission of the Council of Ten was to carry out this policy. Hence no person in the State, however high or noble, was safe from its terrible and secret judgments. Even the Doge, the Chief Magistrate of Venice, was subject to the jurisdiction of the dreaded Council of Ten. One Doge after another lost his head simply because he was accused of having excessive ambitions.

If the Doge planned to marry his fair young daughter to a foreign prince the terrible Council might send her to the block or the torture chamber without the least compunction, because they thought she would be the means of giving her father or her husband too much power over Venice.

In order to facilitate the making of accusations there was the celebrated Lion's head at the entrance to the ante-chamber of the Council of Ten. Anybody who wished could, under cover of darkness, place an anonymous accusation in the Lion's mouth, bringing charges against any person he chose to name, even the Doge himself. This was bound to be investigated by the Council, and often swift and terrible action followed upon the nameless accusation.

Thus everybody in Venice lived in more or less danger of torture and execution. But in spite of this they lived a merry life. Their motto was "Let us eat, drink and be merry for we may die at any moment."

Their carnivals, masked balls, water fetes and other gayeties became noted in every country. Never was there such splendor, such sensual enjoyment, such ardent romance as in the beautiful palaces of Venice. And nobody knew whether the nocturnal delights would end in a summons before the dreaded Council of Ten.

Among the many tragedies that arose from these conditions in Venice the most conspicuous naturally centred about the Doge's Palace, the Bridge of Sighs and the State Prison. For many centuries important prisoners were tried in the Judgment Hall of the Palace and conveyed over the Bridge to the Prison for execution or incarceration. Both beneath the Doge's Palace and the Prison there are subterranean torture chambers. These are filled with racks, thumbcrews, huge gridirons and many other dreadful instruments of mediaeval torture. These were used upon the unhappy prisoners both before and after trial.

Perhaps the most tremendous of all the tragedies that have been enacted in these buildings was that of the Doge Foscari and his son. The circumstances have been used in Byron's play, "The Two Foscari."

Francesco Foscari was Doge from 1423 to 1457, and greatly increased the territory of Venice.

His only son, Giacomo Foscari, was unjustly accused by treacherous enemies before the Council of Ten of treasonable cor-

respondence with the Turks. He was dreadfully tortured in the subterranean dungeon of the prison and then dragged bleeding and half dead across the Bridge of Sighs to the presence of his father in the Judgment Hall of the Doge's Palace.

The Doge, because of his great patriotism, suppressed his feelings as a father and confirmed the sentence of banishment passed by the Council. The son soon afterward succumbed to his injuries and the father died of a broken heart.

Another very celebrated tragedy was that of the Doge Marino Falleri, who was executed in 1355. He had been offended by an insult to his beautiful wife by a young nobleman who had relatives on the Great Council. Dissatisfied with the slight punishment inflicted on the nobleman, the Doge conspired with the plebeians to make himself sovereign of Venice.

He was convicted and beheaded in a most spectacular manner at the foot of the grand stairway of the Doge's Palace. His place in the gallery of portraits of all the Doges in the palace is taken by a picture showing an empty throne with a black pall thrown over it.

The methods of the Venetian Council of Ten at one period have been revealed in a remarkable diary by Marino Sanudo, who was a member of the council. A typical example of the awful swiftness with which the Ten struck down traitors is afforded by an entry in Sanudo's diary. "One March morning in 1498," Sanudo writes:

"Pursuing my wonted way to the Palace I heard everybody saying: 'This night, justice hath been done; and as I passed along the piazza I raised my eyes to the two columns, and there saw hanging Antonio di Lando, our secretary, who used to keep all our secrets, translate our cypher and attend the Senate.'

"All the city marvelled for that nothing was known about it, and he was hanged by night in the official dress with sleeves a-comedo; and this is what had happened: Now be it known this was done because he had revealed our secrets to one Zuan Battista Trevisan, formerly of our chancellery, but cashiered and acting as a kind of secretary to the Marquis of Mantua."

"And thus it was discovered: This An-

tonio, licet he was old, and had only 180 ducats a year, kept a certain mistress called Laura Trovolo at St. Trinita, and this Zuan Battista did also visit her, and during the evenings they spoke in Latin together. Now, Laura told this to her lover, one Hieronimo Amadi, who concealed himself behind the arras and heard the two speak in Latin of State secrets.

"And the said Laura had not the courage to turn informer, but sent her lover to the Ten, who arrested both lover and mistress, and seized Antonio at Laura's house on Sunday, who lay sick there; and Zuan was caught in a boat on Monday morning. And so Lorenzo Venier, the Councillor; Trovolo Malipiero, chief of the Ten; the Avogador of the Commune and the Inquisitor met, barred all access to the Palace and put the prisoners to the torture. That same night Antonio swung from the gallows. He died impatient, and would neither eat, confess nor take the sacrament."

"No one was allowed on the piazza, and so swiftly was the execution determined on that no rope could be found; and since all the shops were closed, a messenger was dispatched, not foot, to the arsenal, who returned with some ship's cordage, and while hanging, at dictum, he fell and broke his arm, and was then hauled up again. No word was heard, and folk said he was strangled in prison. But this is how things happened, and I saw him with the rope round his neck in two knots, and his dress all muddy; and the said Antonio was left a whole day on the gallows, and at evening was buried. He had served the Signori for forty years, was very poor and had a wife at Padua."

False coiners were punished with terrible severity. After torture they were usually burned alive.

The Ten were equally severe against blasphemers. In March, 1505, one was taken between the columns, his hand cut off and tongue and eyes plucked out. In 1519 some blasphemers, including a priest, were exposed in a boat along the canal, their crime being proclaimed, then taken to the hostelry where they had blasphemed. Then their tongues were cut out as an example to others. In September of 1512 the noses of ten smugglers were cut off between the columns.